The Life and Times of Juan Ponce de León
Childhood and Coming of Age

By Dr. Sam Turner, Lighthouse Archaeological Maritime Program, Director of Archaeology

We know that Juan Ponce de León discovered Florida in 1513. We know the importance of Juan Ponce and that he was the first European..., well, the first European with a license from the King of Spain, to discover Florida. Typically, that is about as much as most of us know.

According to the most reliable sources, Juan Ponce de León was born in the year 1474 in San Tervás del Campo near the city of León in the Northern Spanish province of Valladolid.

Juan Ponce de León was the illegitimate son of a Spanish nobleman descended from a family that played a critical role in the re-conquest of Spain. Before Juan Ponce’s grandfather, also named Juan Ponce de León, died 1469 he fathered 21 illegitimate children. Eight of his children were later legitimized when he married their mother following the death of his first wife. All of Grandfather Juan Ponce’s other 13 illegitimate siblings were acknowledged by their father.

Our Juan Ponce de Leon is one of the acknowledged siblings. Francisca Ponce de León, the daughter of one of the legitimate children, referred to our subject as, “cousin Juan
Ponce de León the Adelantado of Bimini and the island of Florida.” There are no known references to Juan Ponce’s mother so in all probability she was common and not of the nobility. She resided in the town of San Tervás del Campo where a number of residents were relations, baring the Ponce de León name. Later, some of these family members would join Juan in the New World.

Juan Ponce de León was born in a country at war and into a marshal culture. Though illegitimate he was still educated and received training in the art of fighting.

The year Juan Ponce de Leon was born was also the year Isabella came to the throne of Castile sparking the War of Castilian Succession (1474-1479). The war was a struggle for the crown between the supporters of Juana la Beltraneja, daughter of Castile’s late monarch Henry IV and wife of King Alfonso V of Portugal, and those of Henry's half sister, Isabella who had recently married Ferdinand of Aragon. Despite a few successes by the supporters of Juana, the lack of military aggressiveness of Afonso V and the Portuguese defeat at the Battle of Toro in 1476 led to the disintegration of Juana's alliance.

The war concluded in 1479 with the signing of the Treaty of Alcáçovas which recognized Isabella and Ferdinand as kings of Castile and granted Portugal hegemony in the Atlantic, with the exception of the Canary Islands. Juana lost her right to the throne of Castile and remained in Portugal. Having secured the Castilian throne, Isabella and Ferdinand were free to concentrate their military efforts on the remaining Moorish lands in southern Spain.

As a young boy, possibly between the ages of 8 and 10, Ponce de Leon became the page of a Spanish knight of Calatrava named Pedro Núñez de Guzmán.

The Spanish military order of Calatrava, founded in 1157, took its name from a castle named Calatrava captured from the Moors in 1147. The initial purpose of the order was to hold Calatrava against all Moorish counterattacks but they soon began to take an offensive role. The order had become very wealthy and powerful by the time Juan Ponce was born in 1474 holding sway over 56 commanderies and 16 priories. However, its existence as an independent military order came to an end in 1487, when Juan Ponce was the 13-year-old page of Núñez de Guzmán, after King Ferdinand obtained a papal degree to bring the order under his direct command.

In 1492 the Christian troops of Ferdinand and Isabella brought to an end nearly a century of Moorish Kingdoms and the Moorish culture of al-Andalus. Now 18 Juan Ponce was present at and participated in the historic capture of the Moorish Kingdom. Juan Ponce’s uncle Rodrigo Ponce de León, the father of Francisca Ponce, played a prominent role in this conflict.

Juan Ponce de León, aged nineteen, with the help of his master Pedro Núñez de Guzmán, obtained passage in the Spanish fleet that sailed for the New World in 1493. This was Christopher Columbus’s second voyage to the New World and it resulted in the founding
of La Isabella on the Island of Española discovered the previous year. Consequently, Ponce witnessed and participated in the founding of Spanish civilization in the New World.

Juan Ponce de León managed to survive, while many Spanish did not. This put him on a slowly ascending career path. Between 1494 and 1498 he likely lived in the interior of the island of Española with the Taino Indians, the natural inhabitants. During this time a number of important events occurred which would have affected Juan Ponce and in which he may well have participated. In 1495, largely as a result of friction between the Taino and the Spanish who roamed about the interior, the first major pitched battle between a large body of Tainos and the Spanish occurred. This battle, known as the Battle of the Vega Real, saw the Spanish, led by Bartolomé Columbus, one of Christopher Columbus’s younger brothers, defeat the Indians using a two-pronged attack strategy. Juan Ponce learned a great deal about the Taino culture during this period, including a certain amount of language, fighting techniques, agriculture, and food ways. All this information would help him succeed in future battles with the Tainos as well as in his future ranching, mining, and settling endeavors.

Nine years later in 1504, Ponce commanded a company of Spanish soldiers from the city of Santo Domingo, the new capital and principal port of the island of Española. These were engaged in the subjugation of the last independent Indian province on the island, Higüey. The province, in eastern Española on the Mona Passage, was given to Juan Ponce to command following Spanish victory in 1505. There he founded the town of Salvaleón de Higüey and its port, Puerto de Yuma, at the mouth of the Yuma River. Sometime between 1504 and 1506, aged thirty to thirty-two, Juan Ponce married Leonor, the daughter of an innkeeper in Santo Domingo.

At this time, 1505-1506, Ponce had news of gold on the neighboring island, San Juan Bautista, today known as Puerto Rico, which lay across the Mona Passage. He organized a prospecting party and founded a gold mining settlement called Caparra in the
hills overlooking what is today called San Juan Bay. By 1508 he had solidified and signed a mining contract with Nicolas de Ovando, the governor of Española. The contract gave him the right to mind but did not bestow any political office.

All was going well until the arrival of Diego Columbus, the new governor of the Indies in August 1509. Diego Columbus was the eldest son and heir of Christopher Columbus. Diego was incensed that King Ferdinand had essentially violated the contract that was drawn up between Christopher Columbus and the Catholic Monarchs at Santa Fe previous to his father’s voyage in 1492. According to the terms of the contract, Christopher Columbus, and his heirs, had the right to appoint political officials on those lands discovered during his voyages. Diego considered Ponce’s mining contract with King Ferdinand an infringement of those rights.

Upon his arrival in the Santo Domingo, Diego Columbus appointed political officials to the island of Puerto Rico. These were Juan Cerón and Miguel Díaz de Aux. These men arrived in Puerto Rico in October 1509, with hundreds of immigrant followers intent on gaining wealth through mining and other businesses with Indian labor.

King Ferdinand responded to the situation on Puerto Rico by appointing Juan Ponce governor. The decree was placed secretly on a vessel in Santo Domingo by Miguel de Pasamonte, the king’s treasurer on Española, and taken to Puerto Rico where it was delivered to Juan Ponce. Juan Cerón was adamant the king had no authority to appoint political officials and would not acknowledge Ponce as governor, consequently Ponce had Cerón and Miguel Díaz detained and sent to Spain under arrest to explain their attitude to the king in person.

Diego Columbus sued the king in the Cortes, or advisory council, over numerous issues including that of appointing political officials in lands discovered by his father. He won on a number of counts including the right to appoint his own political officials. Juan Ponce’s tenure as governor was therefore short lived. Forced by the Cortes to remove Juan Ponce from office, the king granted him a license to explore and discover the lands reputed to lie to the north and in particular the Island of Bimini. This led to Ponce’s 1513 voyage of discovery to Florida.

As Florida celebrates 500 years in 2013, the St. Augustine Lighthouse & Museum stands as a witness to many historical events that occurred during those 500 years. We look forward to offering you a glimpse and sharing that history, our artifacts and our beautiful lighthouse.